



Identifying Crayfish

A Guide for Bait Vendors and Aquaculturists

Help keep invasive crayfish species out of your aquaculture, bait business and out of Missouri waters.

The key to keeping invasive crayfish out of Missouri

To keep our fisheries healthy, the Missouri Department of Conservation is working with aquaculturists and bait vendors to reduce intentional and unintentional introduction of non-native crayfish. These groups have a vested interest in this effort because the future of their livelihoods is dependent on Missouri's healthy aquatic systems and fisheries.

A non-native species is any plant or animal species that has been transported and released to an area in which it was not found historically. Because of their popularity, crayfish are sometimes released or otherwise introduced by well-meaning humans into water bodies from which they did not originate.

These introductions, unfortunately, can and have caused big problems to aquatic communities and fisheries, even in places where native crayfish previously existed. The rusty crayfish is probably the most widespread and harmful introduced crayfish in North America. Like other invasive crayfish species, rusty crayfish are extremely aggressive and cause many problems including:

- destruction of aquatic plants
- declines in fisheries
- declines of native crayfish.

Because crayfish species can be difficult to distinguish from each other, the Conservation Department is providing this guide to help you identify the invasive rusty crayfish and the four crayfish species on the Approved Aquatic Species List. As of March 1, 2008, approved crayfish species are virile (northern) crayfish, calico (papershell) crayfish, White River crawfish and red swamp crawfish. Use the information in the following pages to ensure that only crayfish species appearing on the Approved Aquatic Species List are available in Missouri.

If you find a rusty crayfish or another species that doesn't seem to match the characteristics described in this key, contact your conservation agent or Department office near you by calling 573-751-4115 or going online at www.missouriconservation.org to find the regional office near you.

Instructions for using crayfish key

Step 1: Read the descriptions provided in both choices (1a and 1b) of the first "couplet" and view the accompanying illustrations and photograph. Note that the illustrations and some photographs provide red arrows that point out the specific crayfish features being discussed.



Invasive rusty crayfish have black bands on tips of claws.

Step 2: Decide which of the two first choices (1a or 1b) better describes the physical appearance of the crayfish being identified.

Step 3: Move to the next couplet (either 2 or 3 as appropriate) and repeat steps 1 and 2 above. Note: If you move to couplet 2, either choice you select (2a or 2b) will result in an identification of your crayfish.

Step 4: If you move on to the next couplet and the described characteristics of neither choice seem to match the crayfish in hand, it is always a good idea to go back to the previous couplet and recheck your work.

Helpful Hints: Individual crayfish, like people, sometimes vary in their physical makeup. Therefore, have several individual crayfish of the species in question on hand. If characteristics described in a given couplet don't work for an individual crayfish, look at a second or third individual. Use all of the clues or characteristics presented in each couplet, and don't forget to use the illustrations and photographs provided.

Remember: This key is provided to help you keep unwanted and invasive crayfish species out of your aquaculture or bait facility and out of Missouri waters.

CRAYFISH KEY

1. Look at crayfish's claws, sides of its body and tail for the presence of bumps. Based on these observations, decide if 1a or 1b better fits your crayfish:

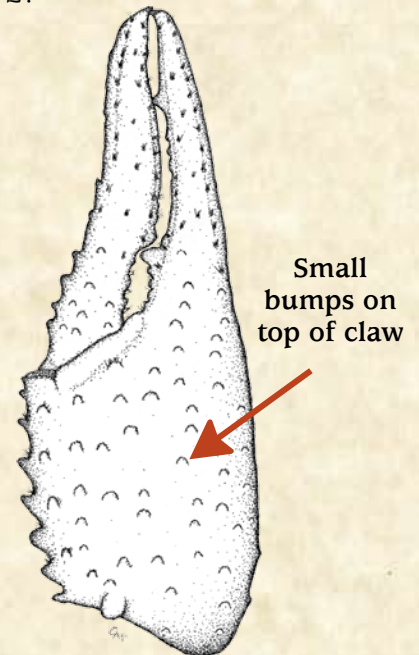
1a. The sides of the body and top of the claws are covered with small bumps. Adults are red or light tan in color with a dark V-shaped stripe on top of the tail.

No: Go to option 1b below.

Yes: If this description matches your crayfish, go to 2.



Dark
V-shaped
stripe on tail

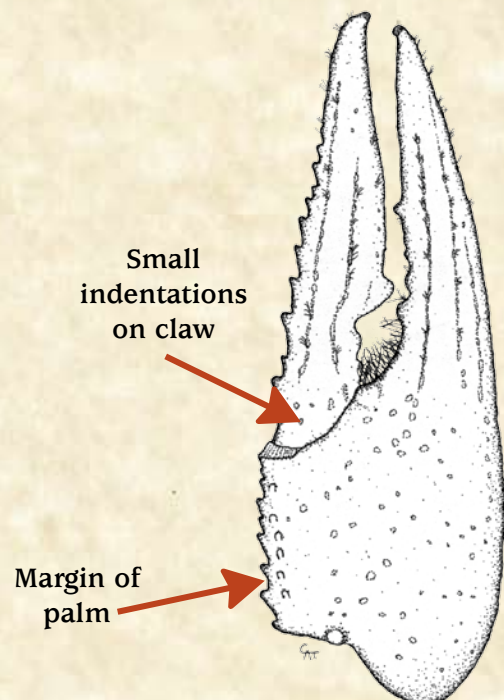


Small
bumps on
top of claw

1b. The sides of the body are *not* covered with small bumps. Small bumps are found only along the margin of the claw's palm. Small indentations or pits may be present on the claws. The crayfish is tan to olive green with *no* distinctive V-shaped stripe on top of the tail.

No: Re-examine the same crayfish or try again with a different one from the same source.

Yes: If this description matches your crayfish, go to 3.



Small
indentations
on claw

Margin of
palm

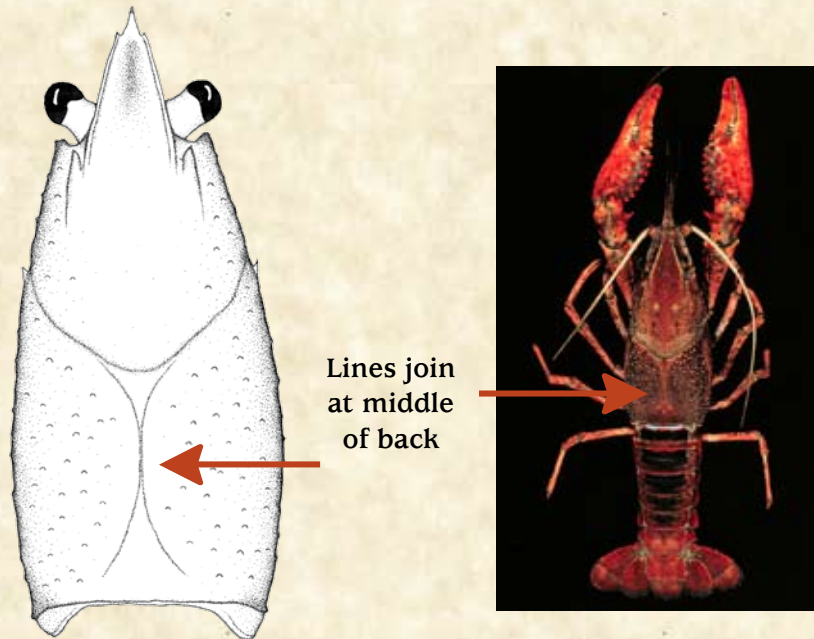
CRAYFISH KEY

2. Look at the ridges on the crayfish's back, and decide if 2a or 2b better fits your crayfish:

2a. Lines or ridges on the back between the head and tail join or touch at the middle of the back.

No: Go to 2b.

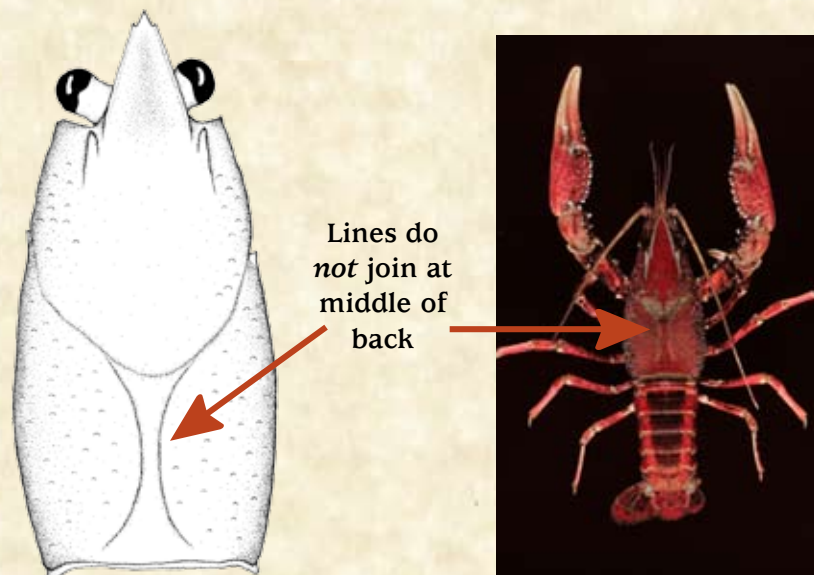
Yes: **Red swamp crayfish** (*Procambarus clarkii*)



2b. Lines or ridges on the back between the head and tail *do not* join or touch at the middle of the back.

No: Re-examine the same crayfish or try again with a different one from the same source.

Yes: **White River crayfish** (*Procambarus acutus*)



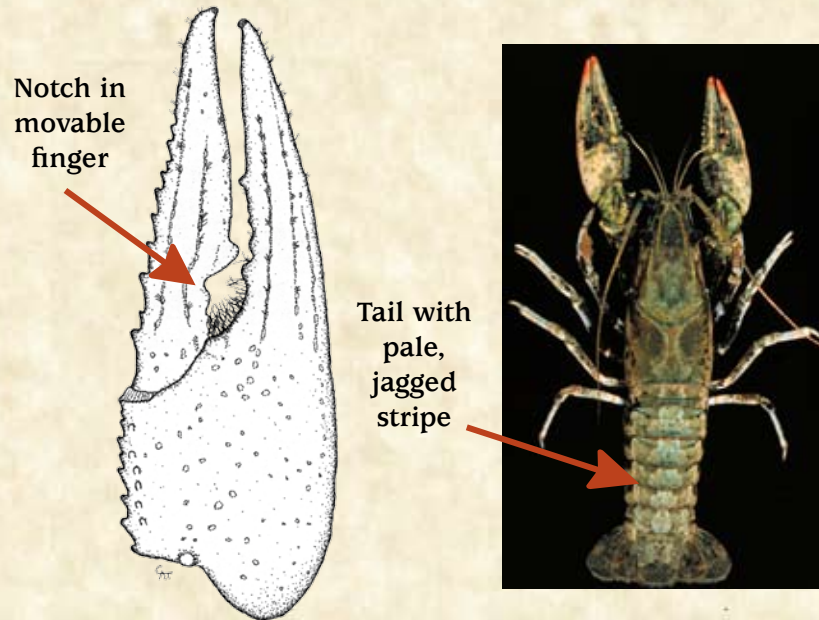
CRAYFISH KEY

3. Look at the movable finger of the claw and the tail, and decide if 3a or 3b better fits your crayfish:

3a. The movable finger of the claw has a deep incision or notch at its base. A pale, jagged stripe runs down the middle of the tail.

No: Go to 3b.

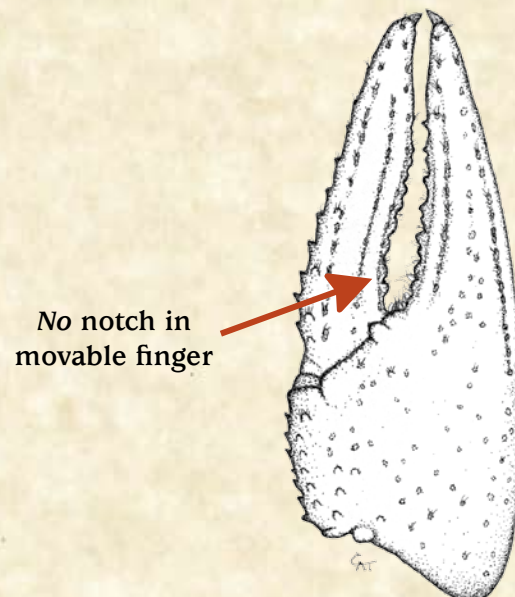
Yes: Calico (papershell) crayfish (*Orconectes immunis*)



3b. The movable finger of the claw has *no* deep incision or notch at its base. The inside of the margin is broadly concave.

No: Re-examine the same crayfish, or try again with a different one from the same source.

Yes: Go to 4.



CRAYFISH KEY

4. Look at the tips of the claws and the sides of the crayfish, and decide if 4a or 4b better fits your crayfish:

4a. A large rust-colored spot is on the side of the body in front of the tail, and the fingers of the claws have black bands near the tips.

No: Go to 4b.

Yes: Contact the Conservation Department because you have identified the invasive **rusty crayfish** (*Orconectes rusticus*)!



Black band
on tips of
claws



Rusty-
colored spot
on each side

C. LUKHAUP

Invasive rusty crayfish

4b. There is *not* a rust-colored spot on the side of the body in front of the tail, and *no* black bands are found on the tips of the claws' fingers.

No: Re-examine the same crayfish, or try again with a different one from the same source.

Yes: **Virile (northern) crayfish** (*Orconectes virilis*)



No black
band on
tips of
claws

No rusty
colored
spot on
each side

Approved Missouri bait crayfish

Virile (northern) crayfish* (*Orconectes virilis*)

- The body is brown or olive green, and several different shades of those colors can be present on one crayfish.
- Lines or ridges on the back between the head and tail do not join or touch at the middle of the back.
- Each segment of the tail usually has a pair of dark blotches on top.
- Sawtooth-like bumps along the inner edge of the claw are cream or yellow.
- Tips of the fingers may be light orange but never with black bands. Claws of large crayfish may be light gray or blue.

Calico (papershell) crayfish*

(*Orconectes immunis*)

- Crayfish usually are gray or light green with a light jagged stripe running down the middle of the top of the tail.
- The jagged stripe may be present on the back of the body but it's usually more prominent on the tail.
- Lines or ridges on the back between the head and tail do not join or touch at the middle of the back.
- Claws usually are light purple in color with a patch of short hairs at the base of the inner edge of the fixed finger.
- Tips of the fingers usually are orange or red.

White River crawfish (*Procambarus acutus*)

- Large adults are dark red in color; smaller individuals can be light brown and covered with black and white spots.
- A wide, dark V-shaped bar or stripe runs down the top of the tail. The width of bar is narrower at the back end of tail.
- Lines or ridges on the back between the head and tail do not join or touch at the middle of the back.
- The body and the top of the claws are covered with small bumps.
- The inside edge of the claw's palm has forward-pointed sawtooth-like bumps.

Red swamp crawfish (*Procambarus clarkii*)

- Large adults are dark red in color; smaller crayfish can be light brown and covered with black and white spots.
- A wide, dark V-shaped bar or stripe runs down the top of the tail; the width of the bar is narrower at the back end of tail.
- Lines or ridges on the back between the head and the tail join or touch at the middle of the back.
- The body and top of the claws are covered with small bumps.
- The inside margin or edge of the claw's palm has forward-pointed sawtooth-like bumps.

***Note:** The Conservation Department recommends the use of virile (northern) crayfish and calico (papershell) crayfish, rather than the White River crawfish or red swamp crawfish, because virile crayfish and calico crayfish are native to a much wider range in Missouri than the other two species.

Invasive species— Do not sell or release into Missouri waters

Rusty crayfish
(*Orconectes rusticus*)

- Crayfish are usually light tan to light green with some body regions being darker or lighter than others.
- A large, rust-colored spot is on each side of the body just forward of the tail.
- Large crayfish usually have a rust or brick-red colored body forward of the tail; the claws are light gray or light blue.
- Lines or ridges on the back between the head and tail do not join or touch at the middle of the back.
- The claw's fingers have red or orange tips and black bands. Bumps along the inner edge of the claw are smooth and not directed forward.
- Each tail segment may have a pair of dark blotches, with one blotch on each side of the segment.

Crayfish regulations in Missouri

- Only species listed on Missouri's Approved Aquatic Species List may be sold as bait in Missouri.
- Crayfish sold as bait may not be obtained from the wild but can be obtained from a private commercial source.
- An organism may not be released into a water body from which it did not originate.
- It is illegal to dump unused bait into a water body from which it did not originate.
- Anglers may catch their own crayfish (up to 150 per day with a valid fishing license) but should not transfer crayfish to waters from which they did not originate.
- Crayfish captured from the wild may not be sold as bait or transported outside of the state.

For a copy of the *Wildlife Code of Missouri*, visit www.mdc.mo.gov/regs/code/, or contact your local conservation agent for additional information on regulations concerning crayfish.

Crayfish are vital to Missouri and its waters

Crayfish are an important part of Missouri's biodiversity. Of the 33 known species of crayfish in Missouri, eight are found nowhere else in the world. Crayfish play an important role in water quality. They break down decaying material such as leaves, woody debris, grass and dead animals in streams and lakes, which help keep debris from clogging up the water. Crayfish also serve as:

- prey for over 200 species of insects, fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals
- desired food for many popular sport fish
- most important forage for smallmouth bass and goggle-eye
- food for people and as bait for fishing
- source of income for bait dealers and aquaculturists



Written by Bob DiStefano, Mary Litvan, Allison Meyer and Chris A. Taylor
Photo cover by Jim Rathert of a virile (northern) crayfish
Other photos and illustrations, unless noted, by Chris A. Taylor

Equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from programs of the Missouri Department of Conservation is available to all individuals without regard to their race, color, national origin, sex, age or disability. Questions should be directed to the Department of Conservation, P.O. Box 180, Jefferson City, MO 65102, (573) 751-4115 (voice) or 800-735-2966 (TTY), or to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Division of Federal Assistance, 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Mail Stop: MBSP-4020, Arlington, VA 22203.